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Book review

Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels, Hsu-Ming Teo (2012), Austin:

Texas University Press, 352 pp., ISBN: 9780292739383, h/bk, \$60

Reviewed by Amy Burge, University of York

The sheikh romance, a love story set in the deserts of the Middle East or North Africa and featuring a relationship between an Arab sheikh and a western heroine, has been persistently popular in romance publishing. The subgenre's growing popularity over the past decade and its seemingly paradoxical appeal at a time of renewed political and military engagement in the region has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Much of this work has been carried out by Hsu-Ming Teo, a cultural historian based at Macquarie University, who has now brought together almost ten years' worth of scholarship in *Desert Passions*, the first full-length study of the sheikh romance. This monograph presents a cultural history of Orientalist representations of cross-cultural romantic liaisons as they appear in popular romance. Approaching the subject from the perspective of cultural history allows Teo to connect shifts in the sheikh romance genre with their historical contexts, offering a compelling narrative of change and continuity between social politics and popular culture.

The narrative begins with the cross-religious, cross-cultural romances of the High and Late European Middle Ages, which begin to develop typical sheikh romance motifs of abduction, the harem and virginity. These tropes persist through to nineteenth-century literature, notably in the Byronic hero and Orientalist Victorian pornography such as the

The Lustful Turk (1828), and find their most successful exposition in the early twentieth century with E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919). Sheikh romances published in Britain during this period were contextualized within the wider emergence of the female-authored novel as a forum for female sexual emotion. The space of the desert was central to sheikh writing of this period, a space that the novels feminized, shifting from a menacing, mysterious space to become locus of rape and romance. These novels are also clear about their fears of miscegenation; the cross-cultural relationship that had defined early romances and that would become a defining feature of later sheikh romances was simply not part of these early twentieth-century texts.

Hull's *The Sheik* is considered the ur-text of sheikh romance and has been widely theorized. Teo takes up the somewhat neglected topic of the historical circumstances out of which the novel arose and discusses it alongside its little-analysed sequel, *The Sons of the Sheik* (1925), connecting their depictions of sex and violence with the social and sexual context of wartime and post-war Britain. Teo persuasively argues that porous racial boundaries in Britain led to concerns about miscegenation, which were explored in *The Sheik*, thereby pointing to the historical specificity of the novel. The specificity of historical context is extended into a discussion of the Hollywood film adaptation of *The Sheik*, teasing out the contrast between representations of the Orient in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United States, the Orient is spectacular and consumable, reflecting the way Americans engaged with the Orient through fantasy rather than politics. In British film and fiction, on the other hand, the fact of colonial engagement led to an Orient rooted in reality, although still drawing on Orientalist stereotypes. One of the most interesting points of difference between sheikh romance in

the United States and the United Kingdom is in contemporary attitudes to race. American understandings of Arabs as ‘non-white-but-not-black’ contrast with British identification of Arabs as ‘black’, meaning that the American film offers ‘a message of racial, ethnic, or cultural incorporation that was different from that offered by the British novel’ (135).

Desert Passions offers the first extended discussion of the ‘Orientalist harem historical romance’, an eroticized historical genre that emerged in the late 1970s, reviving the Orientalist romance. Rather than engaging with contemporary political engagement in the Middle East, these novels retreated into history, specifically women’s sexual history. A detailed case study of Bertrice Small’s *The Kadin* (1978) reveals a radical take on historiography, prioritizing women’s experience and agency at a time when such an approach was not evident in history studies.

The final three chapters explore the development of the modern sheikh romance in Britain, the United States and Australia, arguing that the reasons for the genre’s revival lie in the domestic culture of all three places, rather than in their direct relationship with the Middle East itself. Teo highlights continuities and shifts in themes from *The Sheikh* and harem historical romances, in particular changes in the social status and professional aspirations of the heroine, the westernization of the hero, the absence of rape, the persistence of the harem and the lack of engagement with the reality of the Middle East. Yet, Teo is hopeful that the sheikh subgenre, responsive to reader criticism, may begin to challenge its persistent deployment of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes, which obscure the ‘complicated realities’ (304) of the Muslim world.

Desert Passions offers a robust and fascinating overview of the development of the sheikh romance genre. If the study has a weakness, it might be that while the method of

separating national contexts draws out interesting nuances between different international markets, it somewhat obscures the way that late twentieth- and twenty-first century romance novels are circulated and consumed internationally, regularly published in more than one international market. It is also not made clear in the exploration of online reviews whether readers distinguish between novels produced in different places.

This book will be of significant interest to scholars of popular culture and Orientalism, however its accessibility means it is potentially appealing for a general audience. There are few diachronic approaches tracing historical developments in modern popular romance (see Regis 2003; Fuchs 2004) and *Desert Passions* is a valuable addition to this growing area of scholarship. Teo's study is timely, and is an important resource in the vital task of decoding and understanding popular attitudes towards the Orient in the western world.

References

Fuchs, B. (2004), *Romance*, New York: Routledge.

Regis, P. (2003), *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.